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New guidelines' effect not known

Tests for lead prove negative

By BILL BERRY
Standard-Speaker Staff Writer

Lead-poison screenings conducted last October on children from Freeland, White Haven and Foster Township have proved negative, according to a spokesman for the Childhood Lead Poisoning Project of the Kirby Health Center in Wilkes-Barre.

The tests were conducted on children aged one to six by the Northeastern Pennsylvania Vector Control Association, which operates the lead poisoning prevention program.

The spokesman said none of the children tested showed signs of poisoning. She noted that two of them were rescheduled because of elevated levels of lead in the bloodstream, but emphasized that neither suffered from lead poisoning.

The tests were made after residents of the three communities complained about well-water contamination in the Pond Creek section of Foster Township.

Each child tested needed written permission from their parents, and all tested were notified that the testing was strictly voluntary.

Fred Tito of Hazleton, executive director for the 12-county association, and Ross Livingstone of Forty Fort, managing director of the lead poisoning prevention program in Wilkes-Barre, set up the procedures for the testing.

Concerns over lead levels in children were raised by reports of contamination of the well water and soil samples taken in the Brick Yard, Pond Creek area, and the state Department of Environmental Resources advised several families not to drink the water.

Tito said whenever a case of lead poisoning is discovered, the Vector Control Association has the authority to conduct an environmental evaluation of a family's home and grounds to determine and eliminate the cause.

Lead water pipes, items painted with lead-based paints, leaded gasoline, tobacco, bootleg whiskey and some cosmetics are potential sources of lead poisoning, he said.

Meanwhile, health center officials said they don't know yet whether new lead-poisoning guidelines issued by a national health agency last week will affect the test results.

The new guidelines were issued last week by the National Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Ga., which lowered the amount of lead in the blood which is considered poisoning. The CDC also recommended that all children be screened for lead poisoning.

In issuing the new guidelines

designed for scientists and medical personnel, the CDC said lead poisoning has been reported in children of "urban homesteaders" — parents who move into the cities and begin renovating old homes, exposing their children to chips, dust or fumes from lead-based paints.

Kirby Health Center officials said yesterday they have not yet received the new guidelines. In the mean time, the officials said, the Childhood Lead Poisoning Project will continue operating under its current regulations.

The CDC now defines an elevated blood lead level, which reflects excessive absorption of lead, as a concentration in whole blood of 25 micrograms of lead per deciliter, compared with 30 micrograms per deciliter in its previous definition, issued in 1978.

Lead poisoning is defined as a lead level of 35 micrograms per deciliter, down from a previous reading of 50 micrograms. Lead poisoning can affect a child's behavior and intelligence, and it has been estimated that four of every 100 children under the age of 5 have enough lead in their blood to cause adverse effects.

Since 1978 "investigators have reported a diverse effect from low-level lead exposure," CDC said in its Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. "These studies demonstrate that little or no margin of safety is associated with the previous threshold," the agency said.

The CDC said lead-based paint continues to be the major source of poisoning in the United States, and although paints produced now contain only a small amount of lead, some produced in the 1940s were as much as 50 percent lead and that an estimated 27 million U.S. households remain contaminated by lead paint.

A National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey shows that "children from all geographic and socioeconomic groups are at risk of lead poisoning," the CDC said, noting that such poisoning is most serious for children between 9 months and six years of age.

Road sealing slated

Pennsylvania Department of Transportation crews are scheduled to seal Route 309 in Hazleton this week, according to David R. Fetterman, Luzerne County maintenance manager.

Fetterman also said litter will be picked up along Interstate 80 in Pond Creek Township and along Interstate 81 in Hazleton Township.

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